

## **Detached youth work in the Netherlands.**

Professional Youth Work has different kinds of practises in the Netherlands. The most well known is centre based youth work: youth work in open youth centres. It was the most common form of professional open youth work in the Netherlands during the 80's and 90's of the past centuries. Two minor forms of youth work were street corner work and youth work focussing on marginalized young people ( the Dutch word that was used is not really translatable).

Street Corner Work was a form of detached youth work aiming at people (not necessarily only young people) who lived mainly on the streets and where drugs addicted and or had psychological problems which disabled them to function in our social system.

Most Street Corner workers where laboured at organisations belonging to the mental health or general health services.

Youth Work focussing on marginalized young people was a speciality in youth work: especially in the main city's those marginalized (groups of) young people where not reached by the centre based youth work and their presence in the public domain caused nuisance because of their divergent behaviour.

In the 90's youth work in the Netherlands had to cope with the first serious cut backs due to changes in the national and local youth policy. For instance: in the 80's there where more than twenty open youth centres in the city of Rotterdam. At the end of the previous millennium there where only around five left. Some of the former youth centres changed into semi-commercial cultural centres but most of the youth work was practised in community centres as a part of a broader offer of activities varying for children up to adults and elderly locals. Young people where a though target group for the other visitors ( and other professionals) in these centres and the offer of youth work decreased.

A lot of young people spend their leisure time with their peers on sheltered places in their neighbourhood or in the city centres. Especially the more marginalized young people had no interest in the activities the centre based youth work offered. In the community centres there where mostly strict rules ( drafted by adults and sometimes with the only goal to discourage young people to visit these centres) and the offer did not match the interests of the young people.

This development had several consequences:

- More and more young people were not reached anymore by professional youthworkers;
- A lot of young people were "out of sight" for educational- , employment- and youth care organisations;



- Part of the education of young people became street based;
- The influence of criminal en addicted young people increased;
- Groups of young people on the streets caused feelings of insecurity by other inhabitants;
- A social gap arose between young people and their environment.

As a result the municipalities changed their youth policy: youth workers were urged to work on the streets: find young people where they are hanging around.

Two forms of youth work became an important instrument for local municipalities to regain their insight in the whereabouts and behaviour (that is: control) of young people: outreaching youth work and detached youth work.

Outreaching youth work aims at trying to persuade the young people to visit the facilities of the youth work and community work.

Detached youth work is practised at places where people choose to be: streets, bars, schools, shopping centres, etc. They work in the environment of the young people instead of their own environment: the youth centre.

For a lot of youth workers this was quite a change: in their centre based work it were the young people who came to them, now they had to go to their environment. In their centres there where house rules, the atmosphere was primarily influenced by the youth workers and they had instruments to impose sanctions on divergent behaviour.

They could build up a sound relationship with their visitors because they come quite frequently and mostly for a longer period of time ( sometimes even years).

Detached youth work requires other skill and attitudes from a worker than centre based youth work.

To name the most important ones:

Before the first approach:

The detached youth worker enters the world of the young people. That means he has to analyse the group and their environment in advance, has to know the background of the group, the group (or street-)culture, behaviour, drug- and/or alcohol use, possible aggression, relation with other actors in the environment, extent of the group, location and time of their whereabouts etc.

All this information is necessary to decide whether it is a proper target group for the worker, is it safe to approach, what are the best times to encounter the group, etcetera.

During the first approaches:

The detached youth worker must be able to choose the most appropriate way of approaching a particular group (based on the previous analysis) and be able to explain short and simple who he is and why he is there. The first contact is made for the benefit of



the youth worker and is strictly voluntary. It is up to the vocabulary skills of the youth worker whether or not he will be able to establish a productive first contact with the group and will be able to maintain that contact.

Contrary to centre based youth work, the environment of the group plays an important role. Especially in cases where the group is experienced as a nuisance the detached worker must be able to be able to search that environment and build up a network with relevant actors.

Flexibility and community skills on a variety of target groups are essential skills.

During the contacts:

The position of a detached youth worker is vulnerable. The contact might easily be terminated by the young people for reasons not known or because of a sudden lack of trust.

Some of the groups a detached worker has to deal with have a aggressive or criminal character. That means that a worker always has to keep his own safety in mind. In contrary to for instance the police he does not have the back up of a whole force in cases of critical situations.

The work is more open to public scrutiny as it is mostly in a public setting and expectations can differ to much.

A detached youth worker should on one hand become a part of the social and physical environment of the young people but on the other hand needs to keep an professional distance in order to advocate effectively for the young people.

How does a detached youth worker get the skills and competences to fulfil his tasks?

As said before, the Dutch educational system does not know specialized forms of youth work education. Most of the educational institutes tend to offer very broad curriculums for a wide range of professions in the social domain. Almost all of these professions are practised indoors and the client has to come to the social worker.

The only way to become a detached youth worker in the Netherlands is to gain a lot of practical experience, in the beginning accompanied by an experienced worker ( if you are lucky) and look for trainings and courses that are sometimes given by experienced workers. Only a small part of the offer focuses on detached youth work.

The National Youth Institute has a database of effective youth interventions (<http://www.nji.nl/nl/Databank/Databank-Effectieve-Jeugdinterventies>) and a few



institutes offer youth work study courses

(<http://scholingsgids.fcb.nl/overzicht/trefwoord/jongerenwerk/prijs/56+4349>)

There is a need for professional education for youth workers in general and for detached youth workers especially but unfortunately the tendency is opposite. The same goes for the development of methodologies and the sharing of experiences. This happens mostly in a local or regional level.

It is evident that although there is this need for specialized forms of education concerning different forms of professional open youth work in the Netherland, the economical circumstances (and perhaps the way professional open youth work is valued?) there is not much chance that such a national education will be launched.

On a European Level there are several trainings possibilities for detached youth workers. A very extensive offer of supporting documentation, tools and trainings can be found on the website of the Federation for detached youth work in the U.K. : <http://www.fdyw.org.uk>.

Dynamo International (<http://travailderue.org/>) coordinates the international network of social street workers who approach various populations in their environment ( children, youth people and adults). Among others they have published an international handbook on street work, a practical guide for new social street workers and they organize international trainings for street workers with trainers from all over the world. Their publications are downloadable in different languages.

For a more detailed methodical approach see my next article:

“Detached youth work scheme”

